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"IN HIS FOOTSTEPS"

Clark Perry

Short Story

First Place

And then depression set in, demoralized economists would later quip. Food lines wrapped snugly around mission and relief buildings like tightly-drawn belts. Faces around the country had metamorphosed into somber slabs of granite, unchanging. Even Duke Ellington no longer smiled as contagiously from the stage of Harlem's shanty yet magical Cotton Club, injecting it with fluid jazz and fitting blues. Empty pockets turned inside-out were bitterly referred to as Herbert Hoover flags. Yesterday's newspaper fluttering blindly in the grim, vacant street was, to many, a Hoover blanket.

It was 1930 and New York City obstructed the smooth natural amber horizon with its blocks of blackness. It was a relic abandoned by everyone save a few million downcast curators who had no other alternative but to search for some minute omen of a phoenix among the ashes of their lives. There was hope, much more than history would record, but no one seems to remember what motivated it. The churches prospered with a growing attendance, more hell-burnt than heaven-sent. The gloomy teak collection plates no longer disrupted worship with the predictable clatter. Men donning expensive jackets and patent leather shoes sold prunish apples on streetcorners, but there were few customers.

Jimmy Donovan slurped a healthy mouthful of whiskey down with difficulty, fancied what the concoction would taste like without the rancid water to stretch it out. His stubble had reached a length where his face resembled a dark brillo pad. Thick lips, chapped and splitting from the cold wind, protruded like strips of bacon beneath a crooked nose. Jimmy's apathetic eyes sank back heavily into two black sockets, their whites threaded with inky red veins. He needed a haircut.

The city would remain dead for only a few more hours. People would soon awaken from fairy-tale dreams to see plaster falling from the ceiling and cockroaches scurrying for dark nooks like vampires. The city would wake up and once again realize it was in Hell.

Jimmy handed the brown-bagged bottle to a thin black man beside him. Licorice fingers emerged from overcoat pockets and grasped the whiskey. "How much longer, Mitch?" Jimmy asked hoarsely.

Mitch withdrew an old cracked pocketwatch. "Oughta be soon, Jim," he said, and took a gulp from the bottle. Mitch had been saving the whiskey

behind the closet baseboard. It was hard to come by now. The seal had been broken only minutes before. "Sun'll be on its way up pretty shortly, 'bout haf an hour. Dey better hurry."

Jimmy grunted his agreement and slapped his hands together and rubbed them. Damn, he cursed mentally, why did I go and cut the fingers out of my gloves? Looked tough this summer, but Jesus, my fingers are turning blue—

—"...curtains honey, the blue ones. I just love them!" The ones Estelle had hung up in the house. That small but enchanting house in Queens. Jimmy had bought it ten years ago, when they had gotten married. He grimaced whenever his thoughts turned to this, the tranquilizing smooth days when everybody had a job. And hope. The construction company where Jimmy Donovan had been foreman lasted longer than most other establishments, but not forever. Jimmy saw an end to his job in sight and invested his savings in the stock market. The stocks were still rising although nobody had any jobs. Jimmy, like so many others, did not pursue this enigma. He felt safe.

Then the bottom fell out. Crashed, burst. What have you. The repercussions went worldwide. The economy went zero and Jimmy Donovan's paper-based future plunged to a forced resting place.

One month was all he could take. One month of poverty, of losing the car, of renting out his son's room to help cover expenses, of waking up in the middle of the night worrying if his boy was warm and comfortable enough on the hard sofa. Seeing his wife's beauty and vitality deteriorate like dead flesh as she mended old worn-out clothing where they had once simply bought new ones, of eating potato soup for weeks at a time. Seeing their small malnourished garden looking like a violated grave, having been robbed by someone as hungry or hungrier than they. Then one morning Jimmy Donovan arose at dawn, dressed, kissed his wife and son as they slept, and started walking.

The sidewalks had been cold that morning, a sensation that might have been attributed to the worn, paper-thin soles of his cracked shoes. Jimmy knew though, that no matter how thick his shoes were, the streets would be forever cold. For he was committing a sin that always followed him, screaming, "Coward!" in the slicing, empty wind. He was proving his selfishness to the world, but inside, he made himself believe that the world did not care. Not a world such as this.

And his family would probably manage better without him. When they grew tired of waiting for someone they knew was never coming back, Estelle would probably marry the overweight cantankerous cheapskate who had rented his

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son's room. Jimmy had always suspected them of sleeping together, anyway, while he was away doing any odd job he could to raise money. It had never taken much charm to keep her happy and content; the tenant would have little trouble filling Jimmy's shoes. At least, as a husband.

A whiff of oily fish trickled up from the streets below, and it was still potent when it drifted past the roof where Jimmy and Mitch stood in silence. A cluster of old men, beards thick with grime and tobacco juice, had collected around a flaming barrel on the sidewalk and were sizzling dead fish from the Hudson on thin strips of galvanized tin. Jimmy knew that the stench would have once choked and nauseated him, but now, it made his mouth water with a pitiful longing. He wanted more of the whiskey, but did not wish to hear Mitch reprimand him once again. Besides, he should not drink, he knew. Not now, for there was a race to be won.

When he had first gazed dubiously across the receding rooftops, Jimmy knew he would have to challenge them. Perhaps it was only punishment for leaving his family, his risking his life for money. Sometimes, as he ran, something small inside prayed for him to lose, and he knew this was the self that misery and poverty had buried so well. Maybe it would have been just as well, for you only lost once.

Nine buildings stretched away from him in a neat row, their flatness broken only by eight strips of alleys. So closely packed were the slums that there was barely enough room for fire escapes between each. There were few obstacles on the nine rooftops, mostly small but easily seen vents and pipes. An access door was set off in one corner of each.

No one remembered exactly how the game had begun, but Jimmy imagined it to be a prospect discussed idly over a few beers. The object was to run across all eight rooftops, and whoever landed first on the ninth was the winner. Two supposedly honest men waited on crouched knees on this last building, chins close to the packed gravel, so there would be no mistake as to which runner touched first. Of course, there was always the possibility of never reaching the final roof. There were eight alleys that one had to clear, and nine stories was a long way to fall.

Jimmy had walked ten times into this arena. More than anyone, so only contenders with the highest bets would challenge him. He was making money at least. But that somehow did not console him when he thought of the three times he had heard an opponent's screams behind him as he ran. He always ran the entire nine buildings, a fruitless try for fairness in a match which could flip up a wrong card at any time.

*Then the bottom fell
out. Crashed, burst.
What have you.*

"IN HIS FOOTSTEPS" (continued)

Donovan had been lucky. Mitch was, more or less, his trainer, accountant, mentor, and friend. He had met him the first day in that part of town, and they knew that they had some kind of destiny together. Mitch provided room and board, and Jimmy ran from his past across gravel rooftops. Always to that last building, never ceasing his struggle until his feet skidded onto the ninth roof with an eerie finality.

The access door behind them creaked open and clanged against a cinder block that was used to prop it open. Jimmy and Mitch turned as three figures emerged from the stairwell. Silhouetted on the skyline were two rather tall men, and beside them walked a tiny, frail figure of perhaps four or five feet tall, a child. The trio grew closer to them.

"I take it, then," Jimmy speculated coldly, "one of the men will go with you to the ninth and the kid'll start the race."

"IN HIS FOOTSTEPS" (continued)

Mitch sniffed. "S'pose so. We'll see."

"What's 'at supposed to mean?" Jimmy turned to him. Mitch managed a weak grin, shrugged vaguely.

The three stood before them now. Jimmy guessed that the two men were twins, both sporting ill-shaven beards. They each had a stubby pug nose, and their eyes were hidden by greasy locks of hair hanging out from beneath leather flight caps. A foul stench emanated from their rumpled clothing.

One of the men spoke. Jimmy wasn't sure which. A heavy Irish voice said, "We are the ones who contacted you. You got the money?"

Mitch withdrew a roll of bills from his pants cuff. All eyes watched as his flighty fingers counted out fifty dollars, a little more than half the stack. "Fifty," Mitch announced daringly, "says my man here is best. Why don't we let the

little rascal here hold the dough?" Jimmy grinned. He knew exactly how Mitch operated. He was trying to show the two men he trusted them by allowing the boy to hold the money. If Mitch left only one image with people he met, he wanted it to be that of a gentleman.

There was a deep silence, and Jimmy began to wonder if Mitch had somehow offended them, until one morosely stated, "My brother will hold the money, start the race. The boy will run."

Jimmy then eased his eyes to the boy. His trousers did not fit, and he wore boots with threads of stitching material flapping in the wind. Flannel shirt, brown coat. He couldn't even see any of the boy's face; an oatmeal wool cap hung loosely around his small ears.

Mitch spoke: "Wait a minute, now. I can't bet against no kid. Dis be a man game. Dat boy try an' run, he end up dead."

The two men laughed sharply, confidently, whips cracking and snapping the night. "Oh no," said one, "the boy can run. He can do it."

Mitch considered the bills in his fist for a moment. "Well," he breathed at last, "I can't call the bet off." He stepped forward and inspected the quiet faceless boy. "If he don't even make one alley..."

"Yes," the man replied. "But the boy can do it." There was quiet. Then, "And win."

Mitch nodded and pulled his overcoat tighter around his neck. He handed the money over to one of the men and slid Jimmy aside as they recounted it. "Watch the kid," he whispered as he buttoned Jimmy's coat, almost like a mother. "He might be able to pull it off. It's been done in many games, the kid wins. But I think you can take him."

"Listen, Mitch," Jimmy croaked, "I can't race no little kid. You know he can't make it. Hell, it nearly exhausts me. It's not right."

He felt Mitch's thin fingers wrap around his arm gently. "We need the money," he stated matter-of-factly. "Do it, man." Mitch slapped him lightly on the cheek, grinned, and disappeared down the access door with one of the two men. Jimmy and the boy with the unseen face stood together in the middle of the roof, not speaking. The other man knelt on the tar-laden gravel and began stuffing shreds of dark tobacco into a pipe.

Jimmy squatted vigorously a few times, slung his arms to both sides, loosening up. "Might wanna take that floppy cap off," he advised the child. "Might get in your way." The boy removed the cap with a calm hand. Jimmy

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then caught full view of his red-cheeked face. And found he could not move.

The boy stared childishly out over the populated stepping stones he would have to skim for the two men. Jimmy had suspected that the boy was in some way related to the Irish twins, but now he realized just how impossible that was. Jimmy knew the boy's face almost as well as the one in the splintered mirror at Mitch's flat.

A shrill whistle filled the air. Far away, on the ninth roof, two miniscule stick figures waved. The boy crouched low with such fluid quickness that he seemed to have no spine. His feet were poised lightly on their balls, hands resting on knees. His head stared forward into the night with all the ferocity of a lion. Not once did the child look up at Jimmy.

Jimmy's mouth wanted to form words to say to the boy, but the man with the sweet-smelling pipe raised an arm into the air. The race was primed, ready to begin. Jimmy felt confused because he knew the race should not be happening. But the upraised hand fell, everything was numbed and clouded, and Jimmy ran.

He and the boy cleared the first alley easily, their shoes seeming to spew rocks behind them. Jimmy's legs strained as they stretched out and returned, slamming the ground away. He timed out his breathing at the slowest possible rate, cold air already knifing his lungs. Arms curled tightly like spinning, rotating bars, he charged.

The boy was a shrunken doppelganger of Jimmy Donovan. His thin legs seemed to churn the air with steam-driven power, his neck thrust forward. Together, they vaulted from the second building to land squarely on the third. Jimmy noticed that the boy's speed faltered slightly as he landed, so he took advantage and squeezed a little more from his legs. He heard the boy's feet close behind him, actually keeping time with his steps. The boy was fast. Jimmy was running with the past, but he believed he could win.

As he leapt valiantly from the third building he heard a scuffle of rocks and cloth behind him. He landed, jerked to a halt and turned around, breath coming in heaves now, to face a flat empty rooftop.

The boy had not even screamed, so Jimmy screamed for him.

At the flat, Mitch stuffed their earnings into a coffee can and hid it behind the loose baseboard, along with the half-empty pint of whiskey. Jimmy waited until Mitch was fast asleep before he left the soiled sheets of his cot and slipped into his clothes. From the coffee can he took his even share of the money and shoved it into his pocket. He started for the door, stopped.

He heard the boy's feet close behind him, actually keeping time with his steps. The boy was fast. Jimmy was running with the past, but he believed he could win.

"IN HIS FOOTSTEPS" (continued)

Taking out his frayed wallet, Jimmy walked into Mitch's bedroom. From the wallet he pulled a yellowed photograph that had been the only warm thing in his life. He placed it on the crate beside his bed, knowing that when Mitch saw it, he would understand all that had happened—and was going to happen—tonight.

The sidewalks were going to be even colder on the way back to Queens. He leaned down, kissed Mitch lightly on the forehead as he slept, and started walking. □
